Cryptozoology, 11, 1992, 38–50
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LARGE PERUVIAN MAMMALS UNKNOWN TO ZOOLOGY

PETER J. HOCKING
Natural History Museum, National Higher University of San Marcos, Lima, Peru

ABSTRACT: Following the cryptozoological method, the author has uncovered evidence in the tropical forests of Peru of the possible existence of several large mammal forms that are unknown to zoology. Most of the information presented has been collected through personal interviews with native hunters who have either seen or killed the mammals discussed. One of the mammals is a large primate. Four others are felids, three of them large. It is hoped that other zoologists will pursue further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

Having been born in Peru (to American parents), and raised in the tropical forest region of Pucallpa, I became interested in wildlife at an early age, and was a bird collector and taxidermist when in high school. Upon finishing my studies in the United States, I returned to Peru, and began collecting birds for scientific study. I took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself to gather information from hunters concerning the birds and mammals that they knew. In this way, I have learned about several bird forms that are unknown to zoology, and, surprisingly, several large mammal forms that also are unknown to zoology.

In a future paper, I shall report on the unknown birds. The present paper reports on what I have learned about the mammals, one primate and four felids. None of these forms are included or even mentioned in any of the standard mammalian reference works, such as Honacki, Kinman, and Koeppl (1982) and Nowak and Paradiso (1983), and, indeed, are quite unknown to zoologists who have studied the fauna of South America.

It should not really be too surprising that there remain large animals in Peru that are still unknown to zoologists. The Peruvian Amazon has many still-unexplored regions—at least unexplored by scientists—where many life forms could easily remain "hidden," especially in isolated tropical mountain ranges. What is surprising to me, however, is that a mammal that appears to be so widely distributed as a chimpanzee-sized primate, and collected by so many hunters, should still be unknown to zoology. I have gathered all such cryptozoological information directly from native hunters. My method has been to first converse in a relaxed manner as to what kinds of birds and mammals the hunter is familiar with, to determine if we both know the same animals. For instance, we might talk about how many kinds of guans

he knows, then what kinds of parrots, squirrels, monkeys, etc. I have found that, if I do this in a friendly manner, showing interest and admiration for what the hunter knows of wildlife rather than showing skepticism, this encourages him to share information that he might otherwise keep to himself. On some occasions, I ask the hunter directly if he knows of a particular animal.

When I am given information that is new, or of special interest, I begin asking specific details. When a seemingly unknown animal is described, I ask questions that would clarify if the informant may have observed an animal that is already known to zoology. By having the hunter himself describe the animals he knows with minimum input from me, I can compare his description with those provided by others, and I can then determine if he is describing something that may really exist. If such a report is given to me by a trusted friend, whom I have no reason to suspect would invent a story simply to please me, then I consider the information to be of value.

This has been the case in many of the instances where native people have supplied me with cryptozoological information. I have discussed several such supposed "new" animals with zoologists who are specialists in a particular field of taxonomy. This usually clarifies matters greatly. In some instances, the supposed "new" species have been satisfactorily explained in terms of known species. In other instances, more than one zoologist has affirmed that "no such critter exists."

Using the above method of gathering cryptozoological information from native informants, I have become aware of several cryptids; that is, bird, mammal, and reptile forms that appear to be unknown to zoology. In a few cases, I have obtained only one report of a particular cryptid. Because such reports involve only scanty information, they are not being included in this paper. Should I obtain further information on these particular cryptids in the future, I will report on them.

I believe that the cryptids reported below deserve serious consideration as potential existing species, and should be investigated further by other zoologists. Such investigations could lead to the securing of specimens, their scientific description as new species, and, preferably, their study in the wild.

THE *ISNACHI*: THE PERUVIAN "APE"

Cryptid description. The *isnachi* appears to be a large monkey, about twice the body-size of the common spider monkey, *Ateles paniscus*. (This cryptid is known by different native names in different parts of Peru; *isnachi* is a Quechua name which I use generically in this paper.) It is reportedly very muscular—in contrast to the spider monkey, which is lanky, and long-armed. The *isnachi* is said to be about 4 feet (1.2 m) tall—about the size of the African chimpanzee. It is barrel-chested. Its arms are thicker than those

of most men, and its thighs are nearly as big as those of most men. It has a short, thick tail, about 6 inches (15 cm) long. It is covered with short, thick, black hair similar to that of the common woolly monkey, *Lagothrix lagothricha*.

The reports I have collected in northern Peru indicate that the *isnachi* is entirely black, with a brownish sheen on its fur when seen in the sunlight. However, reports from southern Peru indicate that it is dark brown. These different color descriptions may represent two distinct geographical races. The animal's hands and feet are clearly those of a primate, with nails rather than claws. Its face is reported to be entirely black, and to have a snout and large teeth like those of a mandrill.

Habitat. In the reports that I have gathered on this primate, all but one indicate that it lives in montane tropical forest, usually isolated ranges, at altitudes between 1,600 and almost 5,000 feet (ca. 500 and 1,500 m). In the montane regions where it is reported, its population is not evenly distributed. Rather, it is reported only in small colonies in areas where there is a sufficiently large food supply. Hunters agree that it is only found where there are many wild fruits and *chonta* palms, and where there is an abundance of spider-monkeys, with which it travels. Probably the main reason that the *isnachi* has not been collected by zoologists is that it inhabits isolated montane regions which are very difficult to penetrate.

Behavior. The *isnachi* exhibits solitary behavior. Hunters report that they usually only encounter single individuals feeding in the midst of a troop of spider monkeys. Occasionally, a pair will be seen, and on rare occasions entire troops have been encountered. This primate spends most of its time in the trees, but when angered or threatened it quickly descends to the ground and is said to attack by running on its hind limbs.

Hunters who are familiar with this primate fear it because of its great strength and supposed fierce temperament. They believe that it could easily kill them, and that even two hunters together would run out of ammunition before they could stop an attacking troop. (Troops of 15 to 20 have been reported in the Cordillera Sira.)

The *isnachi* is a vegetarian, feeding mostly on wild fruits. It also feeds on the tender shoots of the *chonta* palm, *Euterpe precatoria.* It does this by ripping open the tops of the palms with its great strength, and pulling out the tender heart. Some hunters have told me that one way to know that one is in *isnachi* territory is the presence of dead but standing *chonta* palms. Dead palm trees usually are not found standing in the forest; they normally die only after being blown down in a storm. The *isnachi* is reported to make arboreal platforms, or nests; these are used for resting during the heat of the day, or for sleeping at night. It makes these platforms by bending branches together, evidently much the same way as is done by chimpanzees.

Distribution. This primate has been reported to me by hunters from various regions, as discussed below. The numbers correspond to the numbers on the accompanying map (Fig. 1). The first two regions are those from where I have collected the most kill reports from hunters.

1. Cerros de Orellana (Loreto and San Martin provinces). This is a long mountain range that divides the provinces (or "departments," as they are known in Peru) of Loreto and San Martin. Hunters have reported it on both sides of the range. It is in this region that it is called *isnachi*, which is a Quechua name meaning "strong man."

I have talked with four hunters who have killed it in this mountain range, and I know of another who states that he has killed three of them. The descriptions given by all of these informants are similar. Julio Martinez was the first hunter to give me a detailed description of the *isnachi*. He reported that he observed a solitary individual moving in his direction high in the branches of the trees. He decided to shoot it, but he was so frightened by seeing such a large primate that his shooting was inaccurate. The first shot from his 16-gauge gun only wounded it in a leg, and the second wounded it in an arm. The *isnachi* then began breaking branches, and made a nest in which it hid. Martinez was determined to finish it off, so he climbed a nearby tree to a position higher than the nest, and from there was able to see the primate well enough to shoot at it again. However, this was still difficult, and he had to shoot three more times to kill it. The animal fell to the ground dead, and Martinez examined it closely. He was still so shaken by the experience that he left the body to rot in the forest.

2. Cordillera Sira (Ucayali province). This is a mountain range that divides the provinces of Ucayali and Huanuco. I have talked with three different hunters who have killed the primate in this range. They informed me that they found it on the Ucayali side of the range, but only in certain locations, which the native Campa Indians of the region are familiar with. (In 1987, a story appeared in one of Peru's newspapers about such a large primate stealing a small girl from one of the colonists in this range, and that several men banded together to form a hunting party to rescue the girl. Nothing was later reported as to the outcome of the expedition. It sounds like a wild story, but there may well have been some truth to it.)

3. Cordillera de Bagua (Amazonas province). This mountain range is near Bagua Grande, directly north of the town. In 1984, I talked with a hunter in the region who two years earlier had gone hunting on the back (northern) side of the range, and had killed a large black monkey that he called a "gorilla." His description of it corresponds to the *isnachi*. He encountered the large primate one day's travel by foot in the lower parts of the range, in an untouched forest nearly directly north of Bagua Grande.

4. Cordillera de Yanachaga (Cerro de Pasco province). These mountains

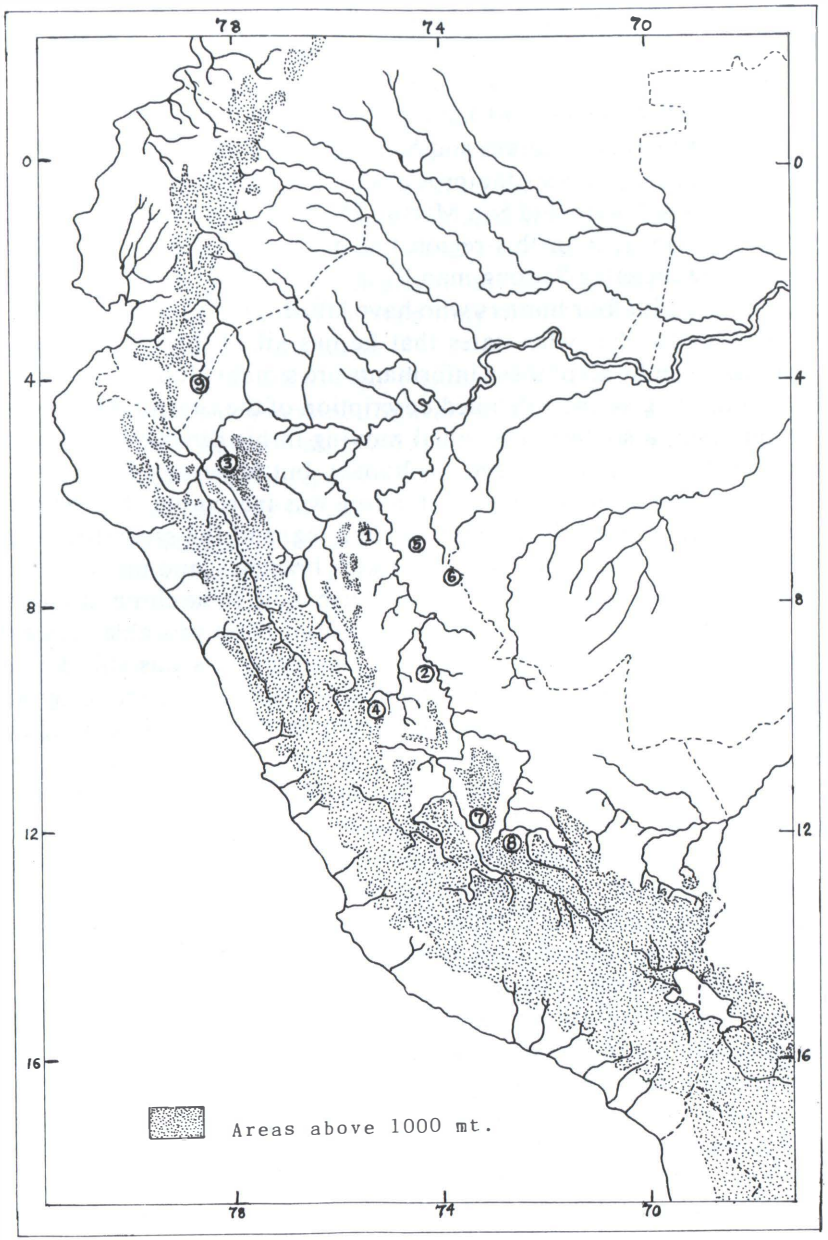

FIG. 1.—The nine locations in tropical Peru where the author has encountered reports of a large unknown monkey called *isnachi*. 1) Cerros de Orellana; 2) Cordillera Sira; 3) Cordillera de Bagua; 4) Cordillera de Yanachaga; 5) Cerros de Canchahuaya; 6) Mountains on the Peru–Brazil border; 7) Cordillera Vilcabamba; 8) Cordillera Urubamba; 9) Peru–Ecuador border.

are to the east of the town of Oxapampa, on the route to the Palcazu River. Three native hunters of the Amuesha tribe from that region have reported the same kind of primate to me. None of them have killed it, but they are familiar with it, and their descriptions are in accordance with the descriptions given to me by others. The Amueshas do not kill it because they fear it may possess demonic powers. They call it *camuenare*, which in their language means "father of the monkeys." The primate is said to live in the two highest mountains of the range. Most of the range, including those two mountains, are within the Yanachaga-Chemillen National Park, a region that has never been thoroughly explored.

5. Cerros de Canchahuaya (Loreto province). This is the back (north-eastern) side of a low mountain range that is near Contamana, a large town on the Ucayali River. About 12 miles (20 km) to the northeast of the town is a low, isolated mountain range called Cerro Azul. I have made collecting trips into several parts of this range, on the Contamana side, but have never found any sign of this primate, nor have native hunters reported it there. However, one hunter claims to have killed a specimen on the other side of the range, in the part called Cerros de Canchahuaya.

6. Mountains on the Peru-Brazil Border (Loreto province). Far to the east of Contamana, there is another much higher and longer mountain range on the border between Peru and Brazil. A hunter of my acquaintance informed me, on his own initiative, of his encounter with one of these large primates in this range when he and a friend made an extremely long hunting trip into a region not normally visited by hunters.

They found an abundance of spider monkeys, and in one of the troops they saw a large monkey. Most of the details of the description given to me fit the *isnachi*, except that the hunter believes that it had a long tail—as, of course, did the spider monkeys. The men were so frightened by the sight of such a large primate that they left the area without shooting it. Several native hunters from the Contamana region who know of this giant monkey call it *makisapa maman*, which means "mother of the spider monkeys."

7. Cordillera Vilcabamba (Cuzco province). These are the mountains on the eastern side of the Apurimac River. The primate is reported to live on the Apurimac River-side of the range, near the town of Luisiana, sometimes causing problems for the settlers by frightening their horses when they are feeding alone. I was told that the primates sometimes jump on the backs of the horses, causing them to bolt.

8. Cordillera Urubamba (Cuzco province). These mountains are located on both sides of the upper Urubamba River, in the region inhabited by the Macheguenga Indians. These people are familiar with the primate, and hunt it for food. Their native name for it is *maemi*. The primate is said to be most abundant in the mountains around the Pongo de Maenique. I was given this information by Juan Sebastian, a Piro Indian who worked several years

with the Macheguengas, and was given *maemi* meat to eat. The Piros, who live on the lower Urubamba River, also know the monkey, and call it *majero.* However, they informed me that it has nearly disappeared from their region, presumably due to over-hunting and deforestation.

9. Ecuador-Peru Border. An official of the Division of Forestry and Wildlife of Peru's Department of Conservation, in Lima, transmitted an interesting report to me. When he learned that I was investigating a large, unknown Peruvian primate, he stated that it might be the same animal that an Ecuadorian botanist named Benigno Malo had once reported to him in casual conversation in his Lima office. Malo had informed him that, about a year earlier (ca. 1985), while collecting orchids in Ecuadorian forests near the Peruvian border, he was surprised to see a large, black "ape" moving in his direction through the trees. He took a photograph of the "ape" before it disappeared. Malo did not seem to give the matter very much importance, stating that he believed that what he probably had photographed was a chimpanzee that some circus must have released into the wild. However, it seems more likely that what Malo actually observed was the *isnachi*, and that he very likely has the first photograph ever taken of it. I have written to him several times requesting more specific information, and offering a good price for the photo. Unfortunately, I have yet to get a response.

Discussion. Some zoologists whom I have consulted about the *isnachi* suggest that what the hunters have seen and killed was probably the spectacled bear, *Tremarctos ornatus.* This is because of the bear's size, black coloration, large snout, and habitat. However, I am convinced that the reported animal is not a bear. I have carefully questioned the hunters involved, and they all independently affirm that the animals that they killed did not have paws or claws, but, rather, the hands, feet, and nails—and tails— typical of monkeys. The animal is said to be quite black, with no white markings, which also seems to rule out the spectacled bear. They say that the animal moves along the branches of trees, and from tree to tree, a feat which the spectacled bear definitely cannot perform. The spectacled bear can climb trees, but cannot move from one tree to another in such a manner. Its mode of locomotion is strictly terrestrial.

The above information does not represent the first reports of "apes" in South America. Bernard Heuvelmans (1958) reports the killing of what seems to have been some form of large spider monkey—named "Loys's Ape" after the Swiss explorer who photographed and reported it. This occurred on the Colombian-Venezuelan border. Heuvelmans (1958) also reports several legends of reddish hairy "apes" in Brazil. Pino Turolla (1980) reports seeing and hearing "apes" in the forests of Venezuela. However, the primate that I have been investigating seems to he different from any of the "apes" described in the above reports; they reported primates 5 feet (1.5 m) tall, or close to that size, ground-dwelling, and gray, brown, or reddish in color. However, the *isnachi* is about 4 feet (1.2 m) tall, is usually black, and is arboreal. Another difference is that these other South American "apes" have faces that are said to be human-like, while the Peruvian "ape" is reported to have a face more like that of a mandrill.

Considering the wide distribution of this large Peruvian primate, and that it has been killed by many hunters, it is amazing that a specimen has not yet reached the hands of zoologists, particularly when one considers that its distribution may extend as far north as Colombia and as far south as Bolivia. I undertook an expedition into the Orellana range in 1988 to try to locate a specimen, with no success. However, I was able to collect more information from new informants who had killed the primate in those mountains. I plan to continue fieldwork in attempts to collect the animal.

The Giant Black Panther

Cryptid description. As the name suggests, this animal is said to be a very large black felid. The reports that I have collected concur that the animal is entirely black, without markings of any kind. Its eyes are said to be large and greenish. It is reported to be at least twice the size of the jaguar, *Panthera onca*. The term *yana puma* is the most common name by which this felid is known, being a descriptive Quechua name meaning "black mountain lion."

Habitat. It is reported only from montane forest regions, usually large ranges rarely visited by humans, at altitudes of between about 1,600 and almost 5,000 feet (ca. 500 to 1,500 m). It often is reported in the same areas where the *isnachi* is known.

Behavior. Hunters report that if they encounter this cat during the daytime, when it is usually resting, it assumes a passive attitude towards them. It is believed that this giant felid does not track or attack hunters during the day, as jaguars sometimes do. For this reason, hunters leave it alone if they encounter it. However, those who have done so have sometimes had reason to regret their action because, when night descends, the big cat is said to become a determined hunter, tracking humans to their camps. It is reported to have wiped out entire hunting parties by killing the men while they slept. It is said to be so fearless at night that it frequently will roar as it moves toward a camp.

In one such instance reported to me, the hunters prepared to defend themselves, and were able to kill the animal. In another case I learned of, a young man in the hunting party had a "premonition of evil," and climbed a nearby tree after his companions had gone to sleep. Thus, he became the sole survivor of the hunting party; the large cat crept into camp and killed each hunter by biting his head. It tracked the survivor to his tree, but was unable to reach him.

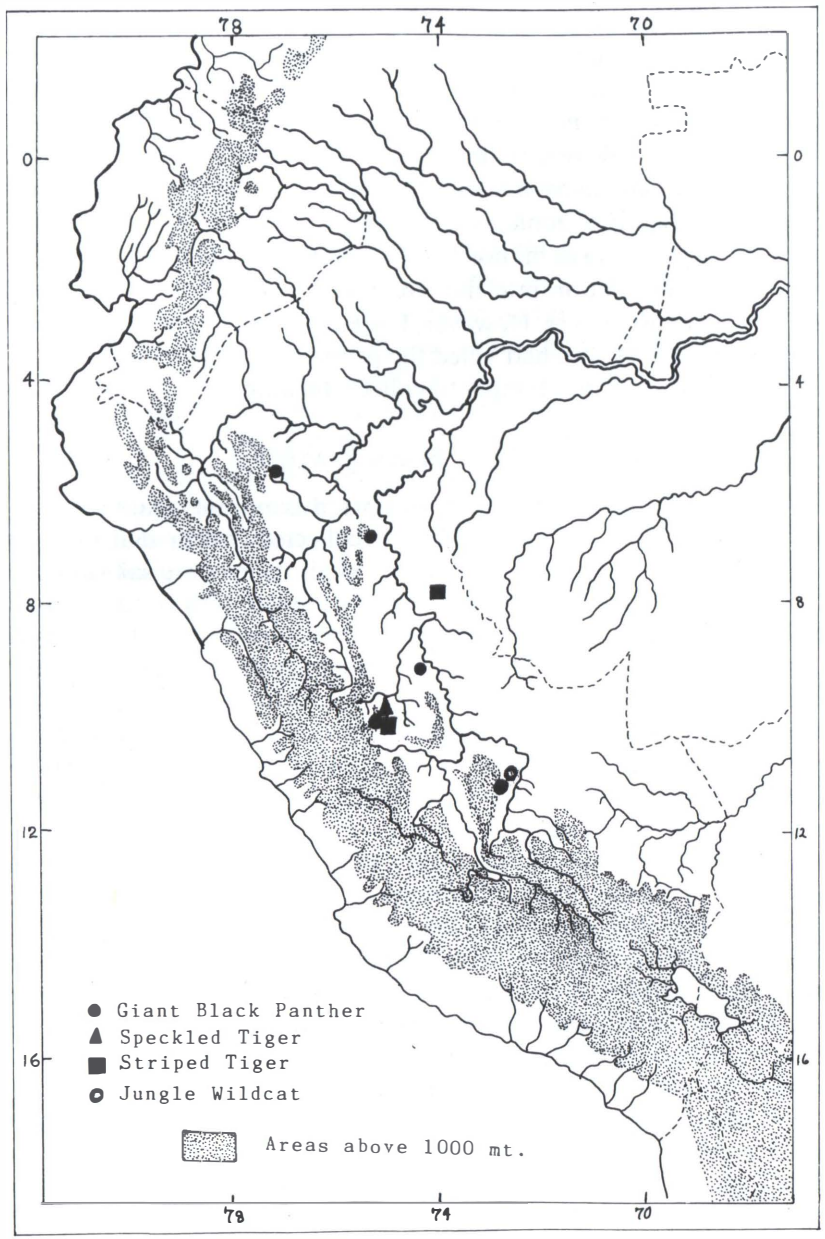

FIG. 2.—Locations in tropical Peru where the author has encountered reports of unknown felids.

Distribution. I have talked to hunters who have killed this large felid in the following regions, as indicated on the second map (Fig. 2).

1. Headwaters of the Mayo River (San Martin province).
2. Cordillera Sira (Ucayali province), by the headwaters of the Iparia River.
3. Cordillera Urubamba (Cuzco province), near Miaria, on the Urubamba River.

I have collected reports indicating that it also inhabits the following regions:

4. Cerros de Yanachaga (Pasco province).
5. Cerros de Orellana (Loreto province).

Discussion. Mammalogists have suggested to me that this black felid is probably just the melanistic form of the jaguar, which is not uncommon in the Amazon. However, this black jaguar form is exactly the same size as the colored jaguar, while the *yana puma* is reported to be at least twice its size. All the reports are consistent in that the cat is enormous. Thus, I propose that this cryptid represents an unknown species. I have been unable to determine to whom the skins of the killed specimens were sold. It is unfortunate that no skin or skull has ever reached the hands of zoologists, but forest felids always have been difficult to find and collect.

THE SPECKLED TIGER

Cryptid description. This felid is approximately the same size as the jaguar, but its head is reportedly larger. Its main distinguishing characteristic is its coloration; its body color is reported to be gray, covered by solid black speckles. (In contrast, the jaguar is tan and white, with rosettes.) There are only two reports known to me, and, as far as I know, there are no native names for the animal.

Habitat. This species is reported in montane tropical forest, at altitudes of about 1,600 feet (ca. 500 m).

Behavior. The two reports I have on this cryptid were given to me by the Amuesha native hunters who killed them. The first report dates from about the early 1970's. In this report, the informant told me how he and another native hunter were hiding in a tree-hut near a mineral-lick waiting for deer. Suddenly, his companion nudged him to look out of his peep-hole. What he saw seized him with fear: on a tree branch near them was a large cat crouched and ready to jump onto their hut.

By means of hand signals, the men agreed which one would shoot the animal, after which they would throw themselves out of the hut in opposite directions. This they did, and the wounded felid landed on the hut, tore it apart, and fell to the ground dying. The two men ran to the village, returning later with several other hunters. All were amazed at seeing the animal, and no one could remember having ever observed a speckled cat like it before. They skinned it and later sold the skin.

In 1991, another Amuesha Indian hunter described to me his experience of killing another of these cats in the same region. A few years ago, while hunting deer at night, he was hiding behind a tree near a mineral-lick. He eventually heard a deer approaching cautiously, but it suddenly seemed alarmed and ran away. The hunter turned on a flashlight to see what had startled the deer, and he saw the eyes of a large cat. The animal came straight for him, so he shot it dead. He gave the skin to his father-in-law, who no longer has it. It deteriorated so much, he threw it away.

Distribution. The only two reports that I have of this felid indicate that it lives in the lower Palcazu River valley (Pasco province). Both reports are from the Cuchurras area.

The Striped Tiger

Cryptid description. This felid also is about the size of the jaguar. It is reported to be tan colored, but it has tiger-like stripes instead of the jaguar-like rosettes.

Habitat. This animal is reported in both hilly and lowland rain forest.

Behavior. Nothing is known about its behavior. Like the spectacled tiger, it is a very rare animal, and I have only two reports of it. It is said to sometimes track hunters, as indicated by the following report from a hunter who killed one. He was on a hunting trip far from any human settlements, having trekked all morning through untouched forest—which he found to be strangely silent. He was unable to find game to shoot, but finally, late in the morning, he shot a tucanet so as to not return to camp empty-handed. On his way back to camp, after crossing a dry stream-bed, he sat down on the bank to rest, leaving his shotgun leaning against a tree beside him.

He was securing the tucanet to his belt when he heard a small twig snap, and he looked up. On the opposite bank of the dry stream-bed, at the place where he had descended, was a large cat crouching, and obviously preparing to spring upon him. Keeping his eyes fixed on the eyes of the felid, the hunter reached slowly for his gun, drew it to him, and took aim at the throat of the animal. Upon firing, the hunter quickly threw himself to one side, rolling away. It was fortunate for him that he took this precautionary action because the large, wounded cat landed where he had been sitting. It mauled a nearby tree-trunk until it died.

The shaken hunter hurried back to his camp, and the next day returned with a companion to skin the animal. However, the tropical heat had begun speeding decomposition, and the skin could not be saved. The event shall remain forever engraved in the memory of my friend, who recalls quite well the main distinguishing feature of the large felid: that it was different from any other cat that he had ever seen before in that it had stripes rather than spots or rosettes.

Distribution. In the above case, the hunter did not give me a clear indication of where he killed the felid. All the information I have is that it was somewhere in the region of the upper Abujao River (Ucayali province). The second report I have of this animal is from an Amuesha friend who said that he had heard that a striped tiger had once been killed in the lower Palcazu River valley, in the Chuchurras region (Pasco province). These regions are indicated on the second map (Fig. 2).

The Jungle Wildcat

Cryptid description. This felid is about the size of a common domestic cat, and has varied coloration similar to that of domestic cats; that is, individuals have blotches of various colors and shapes. An unusual feature is that its canines are noticeably longer than those of domestic cats, or those of the smaller wild felids of the Neotropics, such as the ocelot or the margay.

Habitat. This cat is reported in montane forests at elevations of about 2,300 feet (ca. 700 m).

Behavior. Two native Piro hunters have informed me that this cat has the unusual habit—unknown in other New World felids—of hunting in packs. The packs reportedly include 10 or more individuals, and are said to sometimes be accompanied by ocelots and jaguarundis. These mixed-species packs reportedly comb the jungle for birds and rodents of all kinds. Piro hunters fear encounters with such packs because, despite the relatively small size of the individual cats, they reportedly become very aggressive in packs, attacking hunters and overwhelming them.

Distribution. These small cats have been reported to me from only one region: the lower Urubamba River valley, around the town of Miaria.

Conclusions

I have presented cryptozoological evidence for one large unknown primate and four unknown felids—three of them very large—reported in the tropical forests of Peru. Many of these forest areas remain relatively unexplored or at least poorly known zoologically. Based on all the evidence I have uncovered, I believe that these zoologically-unknown forms do, in fact, exist, and are known to the native peoples of the areas concerned. I hope that this evidence will stimulate other zoologists and cryptozoologists—especially mammalogists—to pursue this evidence further, with the ultimate aim of collecting specimens and, if appropriate, describing new species.

What would complicate such field investigation is that many of the regions where the *isnachi* and the unknown felids are reported are controlled by terrorist groups or drug-traffickers, making those regions very dangerous and essentially off-limits to outsiders. A further problem is that felids, by their very nature, are very difficult to locate.

Because I do not have the necessary resources or time to pursue evidence

for these animals on a continuous basis, I am doing what seems to be the next best option: that is, I have offered hunters in a few of the regions a good price for a skin and/or skull of one of the animals. Hopefully, this will eventually provide positive results.

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